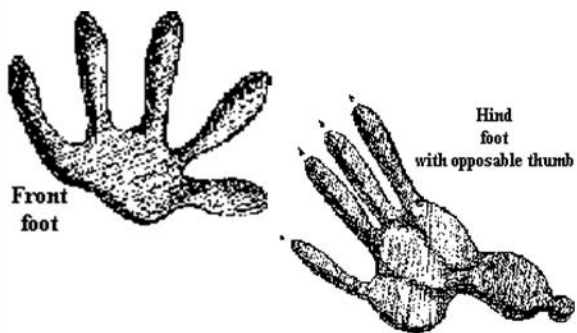




Through the study of fossils, it has been determined that opossums lived during the Age of the Dinosaur. Fossil remains have been found dating from 70 million years ago making the opossum part of the Earth's oldest surviving mammal family.

Today the opossum flourishes throughout the eastern United States to the Rocky Mountains and on the West Coast. Opossums rarely cause problems for human beings other than fright from their rat-like appearance. Opossums do an excellent job of being insect and rodent controllers. Being carrion eaters, they help to keep our roadways and neighborhoods clean.



Ten Fast Facts About the Opossum

1. The opossum is the only marsupial found in North America.
2. Opossums have 50 teeth.
3. The opossum's name comes from the Algonquin name "apasum" which means white animal.
4. In ideal habitats, the number of opossums can exceed 200 per square mile.
5. In the wild, opossums seldom live past 2 years of age.
6. The opossum doesn't hibernate, but will "hole-up" for days in very cold weather.
7. Opossums have been trapped for their silky fur.
8. The opossum is the only mammal in the United States with a prehensile tail.
9. Opossums may growl, hiss, drool or show their needle sharp teeth when frightened, but are docile and prefer to avoid a fight.
10. Opossums can not jump.

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Opossum: The Marvelous Marsupial

Philpott Lake





The Virginia Opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*) is a pouched animal like the kangaroo of Australia. Animals with pouches are called marsupials. Opossums give birth to as many as 25 tiny young that live inside the pouch on the mother's stomach. There, they finish developing and ready themselves to go out into the world.

An adult opossum is about the same size as a housecat, but its legs are much shorter. From the nose to the tip of the tail, the opossum averages 24 to 33 inches in length and they weigh anywhere from 6 to 15 pounds. Males are usually the largest.

The opossum has a long narrow muzzle, pink nose, black eyes, and black to bluish colored, hairless ears. Its tail is long and scaly with no hair, giving the opossum the appearance of a large rat. The opossum's tail is prehensile, meaning that the tail can be used for grasping or wrapping around things like tree limbs. The opossum can actually hang from its tail for a short time.



The dense, wooly under-fur is creamy white with gray tips. The long outer hairs are black or dark gray. This color combination causes most opossums to have a grizzled gray look, although some are almost totally black or totally white.

The opossum also has another interesting characteristic. It has opposable halluxes, or thumbs, on its rear feet. The opossum is very much at home in trees. The hallux aids in climbing to find a resting spot or when escaping



from a predator. An opossum's home can be most any place that is dry and safe. Dens or nests of other animals are occasionally used. Cavities in rocks, brush or trash-piles, hollow trees, and hollow logs all serve as a potential home.



The opossum is nocturnal (active at night), and has a very acute sense of smell which helps it to locate food. The wooded streams that feed Philpott Lake provide good habitat for the opossum. It is omnivorous and eats

such things as a variety of plants, animals, fruits and insects. The opossum will readily eat garbage and dead animals (carrion). Because a lot of carrion is road-kill, many opossums are killed while looking for food along the roadway.



Opossums are known for "playing possum". When frightened and unable to escape a predator, the opossum will roll over on its side, become limp, close its eyes, and let its tongue hang out. The heartbeat slows and the animal appears dead. Many would-be predators lose interest and leave. This reaction is caused by a nervous shock, but the opossum recovers quickly and will escape. Opossums do not harbor the diseases such as distemper, parvovirus, or feline hepatitis normally found in cats and dogs. Rabies has been documented in opossums, but rarely. It is thought that the opossum's body temperature is too low to support the virus.



Photo by Alden M. Johnson